



## How Conflict, COVID-19, and Climate are Making Children More Vulnerable: *Snapshot and Policy Recommendations*

### Introduction

World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to addressing the root causes of poverty, empowering children, their families, and their communities by partnering alongside them to reach their full potential. In 2020, World Vision's global COVID-19 response was in 70 countries impacting 51.1 million people, and responded to humanitarian crises in 48 countries impacting 27.1 million people. World Vision's integrated and community-based approach is based on more than 70 years of experience and shows commitment to quality, evidence-based and high-impact programs. Our programs span the globe, including some of the world's most difficult contexts, and encompass many sectors, including water, healthcare, education, child protection, food security, and economic empowerment. Across each of these sectors, World Vision works to promote gender equality and social inclusion as a core part of our strategy to reach the most vulnerable.

As a trusted partner, we work with the U.S. government, UN agencies such as UNICEF and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and are a leading partner of the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria and the World Food Program.

### 1 Conflict

Around the world, the number of children living in conflict zones has been increasing with as many as [426 million children—over one in six—living in conflict zones](#)<sup>1</sup> and more than [35 million children](#)<sup>2</sup> living outside their country of birth and 23 million displaced internally. Children are the most vulnerable victims of conflict, being among the many civilian casualties during an armed conflict. Children may also be orphaned or separated from their families and become heads of households which leaves them vulnerable to forced labor, sexual exploitation, or recruitment in armed forces. The trauma of witnessing violence, losing a caregiver, being forcibly displaced, forced into child marriage, hazardous labor or a child soldier, can affect a child for their lifetime. It can lead to mental health issues, diminishing their educational attainment, and earning potential.

Similarly, the hardships of life in armed conflicts often force children to leave school and many never return, even when the conflict ends. In environments where basic services are disrupted and livelihoods destroyed, children are often malnourished. Of the 155 million people around the world experiencing crisis levels of food insecurity or worse, [nearly 100 million](#)<sup>3</sup> live in environments where conflict was the main driver of food crises. Conflict disrupts livelihoods, markets, trade, and crop production and harvests. Insecurity driven by conflict can also hinder humanitarian access, leaving communities without essential assistance.

## » Afghanistan

Afghanistan is the most dangerous country in the world to be a child and has been for successive years. Children are subject to grave rights violations including killing and maiming, attacks on schools and hospitals, forced recruitment, and sexual violence. Conflict has exacerbated a fragile food context and more than one in two Afghans will be facing crisis (IPC 3) or emergency (IPC 4) levels of acute food insecurity through the November 2021 to March 2022 lean season. The situation for children is especially alarming, with [half of all children under five](#)<sup>4</sup> (3.2 million) expected to suffer from acute malnutrition. With growing insecurity due to the pandemic, hunger, and the recent change in national leadership, World Vision is increasingly concerned about the rights and protection of children, particularly girls. Instances of child marriage and child labor are increasing as families resort to desperate coping mechanisms to afford food.

World Vision has been present in Afghanistan for 20 years and continues to provide lifesaving assistance through the operation of mobile clinics, monitored supplementary nutrition for children, and increased access to water, sanitation and hygiene.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Continue efforts to address emergency hunger needs and food insecurity through support for U.S. Foreign Assistance food security accounts such as International Disaster Assistance, Food for Peace, and McGovern-Dole food for Education
- ▶ Prioritize diplomatic efforts to address instances where hunger and intentional deprivation of food is being utilized as a weapon of war, including efforts to ensure that security operations do not undermine livelihoods of local populations to minimize civilian harm.
- ▶ Pass Safe from the Start Act (H.R. 571/S. 765), which will improve the US strategic support for programs to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and to build the capacity of humanitarian assistance to address the challenges resulting from such violence.
- ▶ Pass the Strengthening Efforts to End Violence Against Children Act (SEEVAC) to ensure the use of evidence-based strategies to address violence, elevate the Special Advisor for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, and update USAID's mandate for ending violence against children.
- ▶ Formally recognize child protection and education as lifesaving interventions within humanitarian assistance and crisis areas alongside other lifesaving humanitarian aid and programming.

## » Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has faced years of crises and conflict, leading to displacement, food insecurity, acute malnutrition, and significant humanitarian need. According to UN's World Food Program, the DRC is currently the second largest hunger crisis in the world after Yemen, with [3.4 million children acutely malnourished](#)<sup>5</sup>. More than [5.6 million people are internally displaced due to conflict](#)<sup>6</sup> (the second highest number of displaced people in the world), and an additional 527,000 people from neighboring countries are seeking refuge in the DRC. Furthermore, exposure to violence has far-reaching effects on children's social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual well-being and development. [Sexual violence](#)<sup>7</sup> remains a grave concern across the country, but data is often unreliable as much gender-based violence goes unreported.

World Vision has been working in the DRC since 1984 and currently has several US-funded projects in the DRC. In the East, World Vision is implementing USAID funding, working to improve WASH for internally displaced persons (IDP's) and other vulnerable populations. In the North of the country, with funding from the State Department, World Vision is working with refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) to improve WASH, health, child protection, and to address the impacts of widespread gender-based violence through survivor support services and peace building activities. This is an extremely challenging context with limited access but facing significant need.



#### References

- <sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/children-affected-armed-conflict-1990-2019>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1098612>
- <sup>3</sup> [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000127343/download?\\_ga=2.174232162.1315345602.1624185147-659202006.1615888715](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000127343/download?_ga=2.174232162.1315345602.1624185147-659202006.1615888715)
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/news/half-afghanistans-children-under-five-expected-suffer-acute-malnutrition-hunger-takes-root>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/kasai-emergency>
- <sup>6</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COD\\_HCR\\_Map\\_DRC\\_at\\_a\\_Glance\\_30\\_november\\_2021\\_A3\\_OK.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COD_HCR_Map_DRC_at_a_Glance_30_november_2021_A3_OK.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/13/un-gravely-concerned-by-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-mass>

## 2 The COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has resulted in wide-ranging consequences for vulnerable children and their communities. Devastating aftershocks are putting 85 million more children at risk of violence. According to a [recent World Vision consultation](#)<sup>8</sup> with children and young people, 81% described increased levels of violence in their homes, communities, and online since the start of the pandemic. Economic strain on households, and limited access to referral or support services normally provided in community or school settings, has led to an increase in reports of domestic violence, violence against children, sexual exploitation online, and significant mental health challenges. Millions of parents and caregivers have lost incomes and jobs due to COVID-19, forcing 8 million children into child labor in Asia alone. Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now estimate that globally, 5.2 million children have lost a parent or caregiver due to COVID-19, increasing their vulnerability and putting them at risk of orphanhood.

COVID-19 has also disrupted almost every aspect of the food system—hindering food transportation, slowing harvests, reducing food affordability and causing [more than 370 million children worldwide](#)<sup>9</sup> to miss out on vital school meals in 2020. The nutrition crisis from COVID-19 could result in 13.6 million more children suffering from acute malnutrition or wasting.

### World Vision's COVID Response

World Vision's [continued response](#)<sup>10</sup> to the COVID-19 pandemic is focused where children are at most risk: areas of conflict, urban slums, and refugee resettlements. Now in [phase three](#)<sup>11</sup> of our global COVID-19 response, we continue to address the immediate and long-term needs through prevention measures such as hand-washing, training for community health workers, and children's safe reintegration back into the classroom. Additionally, World Vision plays a key role in engaging community and faith leaders to address barriers to vaccine acceptance.

While focused on the immediate health response, World Vision continues to emphasize secondary impacts of the pandemic, particularly for vulnerable children and their families. A recent World Vision International report found that:

- 13% of adults reported violence against children in their households, and 26% reported emotional abuse
- 40% of children surveyed were engaged in economic activities
- 55% of children affected by school closures were not able to continue accessing formal education remotely
- One in every five children (5 – 15 years) did not attend school in any form

#### References

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/WV-GLOBAL-ActNowReport-Final\\_small.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/WV-GLOBAL-ActNowReport-Final_small.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.usgic.org/coronavirus/global-hunger/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.worldvision.org/coronavirus-response>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/covid-19-response-plan-phase-3>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.childreninadversity.gov/>

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



- Increase funding to address vaccine hesitancy through community-based education and work with faith and community leaders.
- Ensure that any supplemental funds to respond to the pandemic globally are gender-sensitive, flexible, and address the immediate and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the health, safety, education and opportunities of children globally, particularly girls, children with disabilities, and other marginalized groups.
- Elevate the needs of children into current COVID-19 relief measures and policy by integrating the [U.S. government's Advancing Protection and Care of Children in Adversity Plan \(APCCA\)](#)<sup>12</sup> into continued COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
- Commit funding within the COVID response specifically for caregiver support and addressing the needs of children who have lost a parent or caregiver.

## 3 Climate

The last 10 years were the hottest on record and the number of climate-related disasters has tripled in the last 30 years. These climate disasters are a [key driver of extreme poverty, inequality and child vulnerability](#)<sup>13</sup>, and it impedes the realization of children's rights. Climate-induced extreme weather events such as drought, flooding, and tropical cyclones can undermine communities already facing fragility. For example, vulnerable communities living on low-lying, degraded lands, or informal settings like urban slums are [highly exposed to sporadic weather impacts](#).<sup>14</sup> When extreme weather affects livelihoods, families often face the risk of child labor, child marriage, and barriers to education.

[Weather extremes](#)<sup>15</sup> were the primary cause of hunger in 15 countries and drove around 16 million people to crisis levels of food insecurity. In 2019, [23.9 million people were newly displaced by weather-related disasters](#)<sup>16</sup>, significantly exceeding the 8.5 million people internally displaced by conflict in the same year.

### » Central America

Central America, in addition to the violence and poverty that plague the region, has also been hit hard by natural disasters in recent years, including drought and severe hurricanes. This has destroyed already fragile livelihoods and has tripled food insecurity in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua [over the past two years](#)<sup>17</sup>, from 2.2 million in 2018 to almost 8 million people in 2021. These climate challenges have exacerbated migration, leading to numerous child protection issues for children on the move and those outside of family care.

In response, World Vision has designed and implements the [Hope at Home: Building Resilience in Central America framework](#)<sup>18</sup>, which aims to address the root causes of forced migration by building resilience at the individual, family, community, and societal levels. Funded in part by USAID, this framework provides families with the ability to absorb and recover from shocks, while transforming their structures and means for living to cope with long-term stresses, change, and uncertainty.

### » Bangladesh

The Southwest coastal region of Bangladesh is subject to many natural disasters such as cyclones, tidal surges, floods and droughts. Increased soil salinity, and waterlogging create difficult farming conditions. As a result, families struggle to grow and maintain nutritious food for their children. World Vision's [Nobo Jatra \(New Beginnings\)](#)<sup>19</sup>, a USAID Food for Peace funded program, seeks to improve food security, nutrition, and resilience. A key intervention of this program includes teaching and empowering farmers with climate-smart farming techniques, sustainable production methods and increased access to markets. Using a Lead Farmer method of instruction, a "lead" farmer teaches 150 pupil farmers these new techniques, such as planting saline-tolerant crop varieties. The project also makes continuous efforts to ensure women's equitable participation in climate-smart farming and to improve access to and control over resources and increase decision-making power at the household and community levels.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase support for multi-year, community-based programs that include [climate-smart agriculture practices](#)<sup>20</sup> in order to build resilience to climate change and reduce needs, vulnerability, and risks over the long term.
- Invest in awareness raising for governments and development organizations on low-cost regenerative agriculture and landscape restoration approaches that are rapidly scalable such as [Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration \(FMNR\)](#)<sup>21</sup>.
- [Include children and youth](#)<sup>22</sup> as key stakeholders in climate education, and interventions in order to train and enable younger generations to build their resilience to climate change and prepare, mitigate, cope with, and recover from the immediate impacts of climate-related disasters.

### References

- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/World%20Vision%20Policy%20Position%20-%20Climate%20Action.pdf> <sup>14</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/02/World-Social-Report-2020-Chapter-3.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000127343/download/?\\_ga=2.174232162.1315345602.1624185147-659202006.16158.88715](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000127343/download/?_ga=2.174232162.1315345602.1624185147-659202006.16158.88715)
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/Publications/documents/2020-IDMC-GRID.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.worldvisionadvocacy.org/2021/08/03/central-america-development/>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://wwwstatic.com/PDFs/Central-America-Resilience-Briefing.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.wvb-nobojatra.org/>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://worldvisionadvocacy.org/2019/07/16/women-farmers-in-bangladesh-use-climate-smart-farming-techniques-for-better-life/>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/development/publication/farmer-managed-natural-regeneration>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/stories/kenya/earth-day/kenyas-super-kids-fighting-climate-change-and-saving-forests>